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Tensions on Rise Between Libya, Neighbors

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Washington Post Foreign Service

CAIRO, Sept. 2—The propaganda war between Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi and his neighbors shifted into high gear today with charges here that a planned Libyan invasion of Tunisia was aborted only by a last-minute mutiny of Qaddafi's officers.

Western journalists in Tripoli have been unable to confirm any details of the unsourced allegations in Cairo's semiofficial daily Al Ahram.

But independently the Tunisian government did lodge an "energetic protest" with Libya for repeated violations of Tunisian airspace by combat aircraft, and Washington was concerned enough about Libyan troop movements last week to issue a strong statement reiterating its support for Tunisia's security.

The tensions underscored by today's report are real, even if the rhetoric surrounding them is exaggerated.

The root of the problem, however, is not so much a Libyan plan to send troops against its neighbors as it is Qaddafi's insistence on sending Tunisian and Egyptian workers home.

Until recently, although Qaddafi was seen as a dangerous troublemaker by many governments in the region, his rich and underpopulated country of 3 million people provided jobs for hundreds of thousands of foreign workers whose nations sorely needed the cash they sent home.

But as Libya's economy has been strapped by dropping oil prices, those workers have left by the tens of thousands—sometimes forcibly expelled, more often going home when their contracts are not renewed or their wages evaporate.

As long as a year ago, 150,000 of the estimated 800,000 foreign workers in Libya reportedly left.

In the past month, the situation has grown much worse.

About 25,000 Tunisian workers were pushed out of Libya in August. The response from Qaddafi's western neighbor was quick and angry. Tunisia, amid charges that the repatriation of its workers was part of a plot to undermine its government, expelled more than 250 Libyan diplomats and officials on charges of spying.

Qaddafi, insulted, sent troops toward the Tunisian border, raising fears of armed retaliation. A Tunisian crowd responded by burning the house of a Libyan delegate to the Arab League headquarters in Tunis.

Arab intermediaries from Morocco and Kuwait have been trying to work out some sort of peaceful settlement, and negotiations have been reported as being imminent. Libyan officials including Foreign Minister Abdul Salaam Treiki have been quoted as saying in the past week that Tripoli has no intention of attacking Tunisia and that the situation had seemed to stabilize.

But the most sensational sidelight on the conflict so far was cast this morning in Cairo's Al Ahram.

The unsourced report claimed that a serious mutiny took place among Qaddafi's air and land forces Saturday at dawn. It named the leaders as Col. Mohammed Barghash, commander of the Al Wabia air base near the Tunisian border, and Col. Khalifa Khidr.

These officers were said to have rebelled, even attempting to bomb Qaddafi's residence, rather than prepare to invade Tunisia as ordered. It was reported that 43 officers were arrested.

While Egypt is reputed to have an extensive intelligence network in Libya, there was no independent confirmation of any aspect of the story. Egypt's desire to discredit Qaddafi, however, is no secret.

As Tunisia's relations with Tripoli have soured over the worker exodus, Egypt's have gone from bad to worse.

The Egyptian press has carried reports of Libyan threats to expel all Egyptian workers. Although the countries severed relations after an armed confrontation eight years ago, western diplomats estimate that about 100,000 Egyptians are still employed in Libya.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in a blistering verbal assault on Qaddafi 10 days ago, accused him of trying to turn his economic woes into a political attack on Egypt.

Qaddafi should "admit to his countrymen that he wasted his country's wealth on adventures and the terrorist acts that he takes pride in supporting and financing everywhere," Mubarak said.

One account of the expulsions in the progovernment daily Akbar el Yom claimed on Aug. 17 that hundreds of thousands of Egyptians in Libya already were on their way to the border crossing at Salum, Egypt. Qaddafi was said to be retaining workers from communist countries instead.

News was circulated of special flights to carry home the expelled workers. They were said to have had all or most of their money taken. The Libyans were reported to have tried to force them to adopt Libyan citizenship. Some reportedly were tortured.

But Egypt as well as Libya appears to be playing politics with the issue.

The money sent home by its "expatriate workers" long has been Egypt's largest source of foreign

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exchange. As many as 3.5 million of its citizens were said to be working abroad in 1983.

Now many are returning home from the Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states as well as Libya, but Egypt has focused its attention on the problems with Tripoli.

The number of Egyptians who actually have left Libya during the past month, according to the daily figures recorded in the press for arrivals overland at Salum and by boat at Alexandria, does not appear to be more than about 6,000. This happened, moreover, at a time when many normally would have come back for the Eid al Adha holiday.

Repeated requests by western reporters for permission to visit Salum, in a restricted military zone about 400 miles northwest of the capital, so far have been denied.

One Egyptian newspaper claimed that the new arrivals were being quarantined because of concerns about outbreaks of plague in Libya.

In several hours spent recently at Cairo Airport meeting planes from Athens (the most frequently used air connection from Libya), American reporters were able to find no one returning from Tripoli.

Some interviews with Egyptians returning from Libya published in Al Ahram last month suggested that their circumstances were not as severe as originally reported. They may be little different than difficulties faced by Egyptian workers squeezed out of other Arab oil states by declining economies.

Egyptians in Iraq, for instance, are under increasing pressure to serve as soldiers for the Iraqi Army in the long, bloody war with Iran. Those returning to Egypt are sometimes strip-searched at Baghdad Airport for concealed items or currency.

By contrast, some of the workers leaving Libya complained to Al Ahram that they were not allowed to bring out as many electrical appliances as they wanted. Some said their bank accounts had been frozen and the amount of money they could repatriate was cut back.

While a few said they were deported, many said they were coming back for the holiday when their reentry visas to Libya were canceled.

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